

The South African Working Class and the National Democratic Revolution

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3. Stages of Struggle

The concept of stages in struggle is not an unusual one for any political activist. Those engaged in revolutionary practice, whether in a trade union or in a political party, do not require a seminar to be convinced that struggle goes through stages. Even the most localised struggles, for example the struggle for an annual wage increase in a particular industry or factory, or a struggle against high rents in a particular township, go through stages. The same applies to the overall struggle.

Our belief that the immediate content of our struggle is the national liberation of our whole people and that this process cannot ultimately be completed without social emancipation at once poses a perspective of stages in our revolution. This perspective has generated a great deal of criticism from 'leftist' circles.

We do indeed see the current stage of struggle the national democratic phase as the most direct route of advance, in our particular conditions, to a second stage, socialist development. Looking even further ahead, it is valid to describe socialism itself as a major transitional stage on the road to communism.

There is, however, both a **distinction** and a **continuity** between the national democratic and socialist revolutions; **they can neither be completely telescoped nor completely compartmentalised**. The vulgar Marxists are unable to understand this. They claim that our immediate emphasis on the objectives of the national democratic revolution implies that we are unnecessarily postponing or even abandoning the socialist revolution, as if the two revolutions have no connection with one another. They have a mechanical approach to the stages of our revolution, treating them simply as water-tight compartments.[5]

It should, however, be conceded that our own formulations have sometimes been imprecise, and have invited the charge that we treat stages as compartments, as 'things-in-themselves'.

It is necessary at once to state a rather obvious proposition, namely, that it is implied in the very concept of stages that they can never be considered in isolation; they are steps in development. A stage which has no relation to a destination in itself not final and constituting a stage for yet another destination is a linguistic and logical absurdity. The concept 'stage' implies that it is at one and the same time a point of arrival and a point of departure.

The real question is how to reach a stage without blocking the route onwards to the next destination. This depends (mainly) on revolutionary practice. On balance we can justly claim that our own revolutionary practice has not departed from the 'continuity' concept of stages.

We reiterate that when we talk of stages we are talking simultaneously about distinct phases and a continuous journey. At the same time revolutionary practice demands that within each distinct stage there should be a selective concentration on those objectives which are most pertinent to its completion. This in no way detracts from the need to plant, within its womb, the seeds which will ensure a continuity towards the next stage.

There is thus no Chinese wall between stages. Lenin emphasised this point when he said:

'We all categorise bourgeois revolution and socialist revolution, we all insist on the absolute necessity of strictly distinguishing between them. However, can it be denied that in the course of history individual particular elements of the two revolutions become interwoven?' (*Selected Works*, Volume 1, p.482, pp. 511-2)

We, for our part, insist on the need to understand the distinct characteristics of the present stage of our revolution, and also the ideological and organisational bridge between this stage and the socialist aspirations of our working class.

It is not inevitable that final destinations follow from particular preceding stages. We have, for example, always believed that under South African conditions the national democratic revolution has great prospects of proceeding at once to socialist solutions. This is because no significant national demand can be completely fulfilled without the eventual destruction of the existing capitalist structure. But this outcome is inevitable only in the abstract sense. Its translation into a reality must be dependent on a number of vital subjective factors. Among the most important of these is the extent to which the most revolutionary class the proletariat is politicised and participates as a leading force in the coming struggles and in the state forms which are constructed in place of the old.

We will come back to the question of the way our working class must assert its role both for itself and as a leading force in the broader revolutionary line-up. For the moment, let us look a little more closely at the terminology we use to define the main features of the immediate phase of our revolution.

Bourgeois-democratic or National-democratic?

The terminology we use to describe the stages of a revolution can either illuminate or obscure its main objectives. The use of a wrong (albeit analogous) descriptive label to characterise a stage can, and often does, lead to wrong thinking about its content. We can easily be misled by images which are conjured up by descriptive labels which have their origin in a different historical period and which refer to a different moment in a different struggle.

In this connection let us examine the descriptive label — ‘bourgeois democratic’ — which has, now and then, been used to describe the present phase of our revolution. We believe this is a misleading description which obscures the true content of the present stage of our struggle. For a start it invokes quite a wrong analogy with the Russian 1905 and February 1917 revolutions.

It could, of course, be said that we are struggling at this stage for some of those political rights which were articulated by the ideologists of the rising bourgeoisie at the dawn of capitalism (the franchise for all, civil equality, national unity, self-determination, etc.). These have become traditionally labelled ‘bourgeois-democratic rights’. The banner of ‘democracy’ helped the emerging bourgeoisie to mobilise the working people in the towns and the serfs in the countryside against the old feudal order and to establish its own hegemony.

Today, in general, it has become an anachronism to link democratic aspirations with the bourgeoisie. A struggle for democracy in the modern era has little, if anything, to do with the ‘bourgeois-democratic revolution’. Wherever democracy threatens the basis of capitalist economic exploitation the bourgeoisie are the first to abandon it. The Fascist experience exemplifies this point.[6] But, in any case, in regard to our own situation, there are even more compelling reasons for rejecting the label bourgeois-democratic to describe the content of our liberation struggle.

In South Africa, in contrast to 1905 and 1917, it is our bourgeoisie (and not a feudally-based autocracy) which wields economic and political power. Our bourgeoisie is the ruling class in every sense of the term. It has achieved and maintained its hegemony precisely through the mechanism of denying ‘bourgeois-democratic rights’ to the majority of the population. The specific route which

capitalism took in South Africa has led to the creation of a virtually inseparable bond between capitalist exploitation and race domination.

With the exception of a very tiny and economically weak black bourgeoisie, our capitalist ruling class in general continues to be opposed to the universal extension of democracy (as normally understood) to the majority. On the main issues our capitalist class as a whole is, and can be expected to remain, on the side of the retention of race hegemony, albeit by mechanisms which involve some forms of power-sharing.

This conclusion is not negated by the speeches that we hear from some of our tycoons like the Rellys and the Oppenheimers. A few are undoubtedly stirred by a liberal conscience reinforced, perhaps, by the fact that certain aspects of race domination are no longer as profitable as they used to be. There are undoubtedly significant differences at the top on the choice of strategies for coping with the present political and economic crisis. This fact calls for the use of all means, including dialogue, to weaken the unity of the ruling class and to isolate its most reactionary sector; it does not imply that they can become part of the revolutionary camp.

This reality makes a special imprint on the content of the immediate phase of our revolution. For example, it cannot be said of our revolution, as Lenin was able to say of pre-October Russia, that 'the revolution expresses the interests of the entire bourgeoisie as well'. It certainly does not do so in our case. We therefore believe that it is misleading to use the words 'bourgeois-democratic' to describe the present stage. The words National Democratic are closer to our reality. We will return to this question when we touch on the specific social content of our national democratic revolution.

The analytical path along which we have journeyed has been the target of attacks by critics from different positions. Our enemies on the right (including Botha) allege that we control the ANC and that our hidden agenda is the immediate capture of fully-fledged socialist power. Our detractors on the ultra-left accuse us of the very opposite sins; that we are being dragged in the tail of nationalism and that we have abandoned our socialist goals.

But even among some of our close friends and supporters there is a need to share a better understanding of the real content of the immediate social transformation that we seek. For example, in a recent interview Dr V Goncharov[7] is reported to have said that he detected an attempt by some ANC members 'to put before the national liberation movement now the tasks of the socialist revolution' and that this approach poses the danger that they will lose allies in the population'.

Neither the SACP nor the ANC nor any of their authoritative spokespersons have advanced socialism as the immediate objective. Perhaps Dr Goncharov's fears are fertilised by the fact that our National Democratic Revolution has a special content, necessitating immediate social measures (especially in the economic sphere) which appear to have a socialist flavour. The Freedom Charter (which is not a socialist document) contains such elements. If, analytically speaking, we look at the first stage of our revolution through bourgeois-democratic spectacles, we risk confusing (as, I fear, Goncharov does) some of the essential radical changes with socialist transformation.

In other words, there is a distinction between the social content of our National Democratic Revolution and socialist transformation. For reasons which are special to our own situation, the present phase of our revolution contains elements of both national and social emancipation; it is not the classic bourgeois-democratic revolution nor is it yet the socialist revolution. This is so because of the unique relationship between capitalist exploitation and national domination in South Africa.

In the world as a whole, capitalist exploitation does not necessarily involve race domination. But the historically-evolved connection between capitalist exploitation and race domination in South Africa creates a link between national liberation and social emancipation. In our conditions you don't have to be a doctrinaire Marxist to conclude that a liberation which deals only with a rearrangement of the voting system and leaves undisturbed the race monopoly of 99% of our wealth, is no liberation at all. Any honest black nationalist understands that white political privilege has been the device to create and protect white economic privilege.

It is therefore impossible to imagine any real form of national liberation which does not, at the same time, involve a fundamental rearrangement of the ownership and distribution of wealth. Even Gavin Relly, the current boss of Anglo-American, was forced to declare:

'In the economic field, whilst I as a businessman would want the freest environment for the private sector to pursue its interests, I accept that some form of mixed economy is likely ... This is so because there is quite justifiable emphasis on the part of black South Africans on a more equitable distribution of wealth, to compensate for the errors of omission and commission of apartheid'(sic). (*Sunday Times* 1.6.86)

It is precisely our Party's emphasis on the economic content of our National Democratic Revolution which has contributed so much towards the spread of revolutionary nationalism. And it is for the same reason that the Party has won such

an important place in the liberation alliance and gained so much popularity among the workers and youth as an independent vanguard.

It is, of course, imperative (as we have already stressed) that we mobilise the widest democratic unity around a programme of immediate assault on the racist tyranny. However, the economic content of our National Democratic Revolution has to be guarded even at the risk of losing some 'potential allies'. If we retreat too far on this aspect we may entice more 'allies' but, in the process, we would also risk losing our mass revolutionary following. Compared to analogous phases (the Russian 1905 and February 1917 revolutions) certain of the key elements of our democratic revolution are, therefore, much more closely 'interwoven' with the longer-term socialist transformation.

The shortest route to socialism in our country is via a democratic state. But it will be a democratic state which will at once be required to implement economic measures which go far beyond bourgeois-democracy. These economic measures, dictated by the most elementary objectives of our national liberation struggle, will erect a favourable framework for a socialist transformation but will not, in themselves, create, or necessarily lead to, socialism.

A speedy advance towards socialism will depend, primarily, on the place which the working class has won for itself as a leader of society.

4. Working Class Leadership

If the working class emerges as the dominant social force in a truly democratic post-apartheid state, the possibility is clearly opened up of a peaceful progression towards socialism. Those 'revolutionaries' who may throw up their hands in horror at the suggestion that conditions might open up the possibility of a peaceful transition towards socialism should take note of Lenin's words:

'To become a power the class-conscious workers must win the majority to their side. As long as no violence is used against the people there is no other road to power. We are not Blanquists, we do not stand for the seizure of power by a minority' (*Selected Works*, Vol.2, p.36).

To eventually win the majority of our people for a socialist South Africa, we must spread socialist awareness and socialist consciousness now, mainly among the workers but also among the rural poor and the middle strata. We must also ensure that the working class emerges as the politically-dominant social class in the post-

apartheid state. This can only be achieved if the working class wins a place now as the leading social force in the inter-class liberation alliance.

But, it is not only to ensure a post-apartheid advance towards socialism that the role of the working class is crucial. The immediate objectives of real national liberation as envisaged by the ANC and SACP and whose goals are embodied in the Freedom Charter cannot be effectively fulfilled without the organised strength and leadership of the working class. We emphasise again that if the working class isolates itself from the alliance the result would be to dilute the content of the national democratic revolution, to hand over its direction to the other class forces and, in the long term, to hold back socialist advance.[8]

The working class cannot play the key role by merely leading itself and sloganising about its historic mission. It must win popular acceptance on the ground as the most effective champion of the democratic aspirations of all the racially-oppressed groupings. It must work with, and provide leadership to, our youth, women, intellectuals, small traders, peasants, the rural poor and — yes — even the racially-dominated black bourgeoisie, all of whom are a necessary part of the broad front of our liberation struggle.

It is, however, sometimes alleged that an alliance will tie the hands of the working class and erode its independence. Such an outcome is certainly not inevitable.

The Vietnamese leader, Le Duan, described an alliance as a 'unity of opposites'. The classes and strata which come together in a front of struggle usually have different long-term interests and, often, even contradictory expectations from the immediate phase. The search for agreement usually leads to a minimum platform which excludes some of the positions of the participating classes or strata. It follows that an alliance can only be created if these diverse forces are prepared to enter into a compromise. And it can only survive and flourish if it is governed by a democratic relationship between the groupings which have come together.

But when a front is created the working class does not just melt into it. It does not abandon its independent class objectives or independent class organisation. On the contrary, the strengthening of workers' independent mass and vanguard structures is even more imperative in periods demanding organised relations with other class forces. This brings us directly to the organisational instruments of working class leadership.

The Instruments of Working Class Leadership

In general, workers must be active wherever people come together in struggle, whether at national, regional or local levels. The whole mass democratic movement the UDF, youth organisations, women's organisations, civics, street committees, students, church-goers, etc., must feel the influence of workers' militancy and dedication. The majority of most of these categories are, in any case, workers who should ensure, through democratic participation, that their interests are not swamped by the other social groupings.

The independent role of the working class and the way it relates to other classes of our society, at once raises important questions connected with the character and role of three key worker-related sectors of our struggle: the national movement, the trade union movement and the political party of the working class. It also raises questions about the way in which these sectors relate to one another. Let us say a few words about each of these sectors.

Trade Unions and the Working Class

A trade union is the prime mass organisation of the working class. To fulfil its purpose, it must be as broad as possible and fight to maintain its legal status. It must attempt, in the first place, to unite, on an industrial basis, all workers (at whatever level of political consciousness) who understand the elementary need to come together and defend and advance their economic conditions. It cannot demand more as a condition of membership. But because the state and its political and repressive apparatus is an instrument of the dominant economic classes, it is impossible for trade unions in any part of the world to keep out of the broader political conflict.

Especially in our country, where racist domination and capitalist exploitation are two sides of the same coin, it is even more clear that a trade union cannot stand aside from the liberation struggle. Indeed, the trade union movement is the most important mass contingent of the working class. Its organised involvement in struggle, both as an independent force and as part of the broad liberation alliance, undoubtedly reinforces the dominant role of the workers as a class. In addition, trade unions' and workers' experience of struggle in unions provide the most fertile field in which to school masses of workers in socialist understanding and political consciousness.

The very fact that the workers' economic struggle cannot be separated from the struggle against national domination has helped to blur the border-line between trade unionism and the political leadership of the working class as a whole. It is, however, vital to maintain the distinction between trade union politics and overall

revolutionary leadership. A trade union cannot carry out this dual role; if it attempted to do so it would have to change its basic character and risk committing suicide as a mass legal force. In addition, the very nature and purpose of trade unionism disqualifies it from carrying out the tasks of a revolutionary vanguard.[9]

The syndicalist notion that trade unions should act as political parties is so discredited that it has few, if any, open adherents. But, from time to time, the notion is introduced through the back door in the shape of policies which would, in practice, allocate such a role to the trade union movement.

An example of one such tendency is the premature attempt to formally incorporate the objective of socialism into trade unions and the federation to which they belong. Such a move would narrow the mass character of the trade union movement by demanding an unreal level of political consciousness from its members or affiliates as a condition for joining. It would also, incidentally, give the enemy the very excuse it needs to deal with one of its most formidable foes.

Another example, at the level of the mass democratic movement, is a recent suggestion that new grassroots United Front structures should be set up at national, regional and local community levels.[10] These structures would be restricted to sectors which are predominantly of working class origin unemployed, organised workers, rural poor, youth and students, working women, etc. The effect of this approach would be to downgrade the UDF as the umbrella of the broad legal liberation front and to replace it with a narrower front run by the trade union movement[11].

The tendency to mechanically apply the principles of trade union politics and organisation to the broader political struggle is also evident in some of the debates around questions of the democratic content of popular and working class political structures. Using the trade union movement as a model, critics of the UDF allege an absence of democratic control from below. They also express concern that the mass of the workers have very little democratic control over their revolutionary parties which claim a vanguard role. All this is contrasted with the trade union movement which, by virtue of its democratic traditions and practices, is claimed to be better equipped to represent the working class.

These positions (advanced mainly by some union-linked academics, contain a mixture of legitimate concerns relating to the defence of some fundamental principles of trade union organisation and erroneous notions about political organisation. Trade unionism in our country has been guided by appropriate organisational forms and democratic processes. Without open public elections,

complete participation of the mass of the membership in all decision-making, day-to-day accountability of officials, etc., trade unionism would lose its effectiveness.

But these very organisational forms and practices (which must be defended and deepened in the trade union movement) would become a paralysing extravagance if transplanted to a working class political party or if applied mechanically to political structures of the mass democratic movement, operating under emergency rule.

Unlike a trade union, a worker's vanguard does not, and should not, have the character of a mass movement. It cannot hope to survive in illegal conditions without clandestine methods which often, unavoidably, conflict with democratic practices. A worker's political vanguard is guided by the Leninist principles of democracy and centralism a combination whose precise mixture is dictated by the actual conditions of revolutionary struggle. An attempt to apply trade union organisational practices to such a vanguard would spell the end of revolutionary political leadership in our conditions. Equally, the trade union movement would be doomed if it attempted to act like a Communist Party.

Even a mass political movement like the UDF would be disabled politically if, before each mass action, it were obliged to go through the same kind of democratic procedures which are so vital and appropriate for workers in economic struggle against the bosses. A strike ballot in a labour dispute is a necessity; its rationale cannot be extended to a political struggle situation. The guiding core of a political mass front would paralyse itself by the continuous need for mandates and referenda from its rank and file.

Intensified repression in the recent period has, for example, imposed methods of semi-clandestinity on the UDF, unavoidably affecting some of its consultative and collective practices; a fact unjustly exploited by some of the detractors of the UDF.

We do not claim that the necessary democratic practices have always been implemented within the mass democratic movement, or that Communist Parties have never abused democracy on the excuse of centralism. But such illegitimate departures from the norms must be dealt with as a separate problem; they should not become the excuse for insisting on syndicalist practices which, in the case of the political leadership of the struggle, would lead to organisational constipation.

The ANC and the Working Class

The main core of the whole democratic struggle illegal and legal is the ANC which stands at the head of the liberation alliance. As head of this alliance and prime representative of all the oppressed, it welcomes within its ranks all from whatever class they come who support and are ready to fight for the aims of the Freedom Charter. It is a revolutionary nationalist organisation with popular roots. It is not, however, 'populist'. The ANC's Strategy and Tactics recognises that there are different classes among the people with different long-term aspirations.

The overwhelming majority of the people are working class. This explains why the ANC's composition and policies show a strong bias towards the working class. It also considers it proper and necessary for socialist ideology to be discussed and understood in its ranks. But, despite the fact that the ANC has an understandable bias towards the working class it does not, and clearly should not, adopt a socialist platform which the so-called Marxist Workers' Tendency (expelled from the ANC) would like it to do. If it adopted such a platform it would destroy its character as the prime representative of all the classes among the oppressed black majority.

At the same time, for reasons already outlined, its revolutionary nationalism does, of necessity, contain a social content which reflects our specific national liberation aspirations a content which will ultimately facilitate the socialist transformation but is not premised on it. Worker participation in the ANC is one of the important ways in which our working class plays its role in the democratic revolution. But, above all, the tripartite alliance, moulded in the revolutionary underground, between the ANC, the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU), and our SACP, represents a framework which expresses the political interests of our working class in the broad front of struggle.

The SACP and the Working Class

Workers' political leadership must represent the working class not just in economic struggles against the bosses but, more so, in its relation to all classes of society and to the state as an organised force. We stress again that a trade union cannot carry out this role. Only a political vanguard of the working class can do so.

A vanguard party, representing the historic aspirations of the working class, cannot (like a trade union) have a mass character. It must attract the most advanced representatives of the working class; mainly professional revolutionaries with an understanding of Marxist theory and practice, an unconditional dedication to the worker's cause, and a readiness, if need be, to sacrifice their very lives in the cause of freedom and socialism. Our SACP is such a Party.

We have made a unique contribution to the ideological and organisational strengthening of the national movement. Today our Party is described as one of the two main pillars of the liberation alliance led by the ANC. As an independent Party, we have devoted our main energies to strengthen workers' organisations, to spread socialist awareness and to provide working class political leadership.

There is no organised force in our country's history which has matched our Party's contribution to the spread of genuine workers' organisation at the point of production. We can truly claim to be the parent of black trade unionism.

A strong trade union movement and a workers' political vanguard such as ours are essential conditions for the kind of victory in the democratic revolution which will find a working class equipped organisationally and ideologically to assert its historic role. But we emphasise again that there is both a distinction and a harmony in the character and roles of these two vital sectors. Each has a specific role to play in advancing the interests of our working class as an independent social force and as the leading class in the immediate struggle to build a united, non-racial and democratic South Africa.

This brings us directly to the next related section which touches on the theoretical basis of our approach to the building of the South African nation.

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